DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 122 270 CS 202 610

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TITLE Public Doublespeak: The Ad Man in Search of the Idiot [with Notes on the Complicity of English Teachers].
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Secondary School English Conference (Boston, Massachusetts, April 2-4, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; *Consumer Education; *English Curriculum; Language Arts; *Learning Processes; Mass Media; Perceptual Development; *Publicize; Teaching Methods; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Public Doublespeak

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the "back to basics" movement represents a simplistic assessment of the problem it is trying to deal with. It is not necessary for the English curriculum to "return" to narrowly defined basic skills because the English curriculum, in fact, never left them, and that is the real problem. Language development is a process which deserves a broad approach. Three basic levels of processes are identified: imitative processes related to basic literacy at the recognition and recall levels; organizing processes related to fluency in the use of basic language tools; and critical, creative, and evaluative processes involving originality and conscious choice of language alternatives. These processes are discussed in terms of the English curriculum, including reading, speaking, and writing. Students must be taught to become wise consumers, capable of recognizing the honest statement of an idea and rejecting doublespeak. They must also be able to detect and interpret a writer's or speaker's tone, stance, and intent; be able to critically question the kinds of "authority" used in advertising; and become sensitive and wise about the power of visual images. (TS)

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PUBLIC DOUBLESPEAK: THE AD MAN IN SEARCH OF THE IDIOT [With Notes on the Complicity of English Teachers] *

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At the NCTE Convention in San Diego I became acutely aware of the amount of mileage that we English teachers, as the annointed guardians of the language, have been getting from the recent emphasis upon public misuse and abuse of the language--most evident in the recent Watergate scandal. How fortuitous it was for us that a lowly and now all but forgotten security guard--whose own language quite likely might be considered something less than a model of linguistic elegance--discovered some suspicious antics, added up the evidence, concluded that something was amiss, reported the incident, and thus set in motion a chain of events which focused world wide attention upon one of the most daring of all examples of what appears to be something of an American tradition: public rhetoric that belies the private truth it purports to represent. In the wake of the public scandals of Watergate and the resulting public indignation, we were provided with a way to generate instant headlines of our own. After all, isn't it just and perfect and right that English teachers should be against irresponsible and immoral use of language to deceive the public; that we should shout and stomp in righteous indignation against the euphemisms with which government and political leaders sugar-coat criminal activities and intent; that we should rail against the fact that public liars can surround themselves with immunity by such deliberately contrived statements as "It is my best recollection that..."? The examples

*An address delivered at the NCTE Secondary Section Conference in Boston, Massachusetts, April 2, 1976

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of public lies couched in contemptuously slick language--from Watergate alone--are sufficiently numerous for our Committee on Public Doublespeak to keep themselves busy for several years. I applaud their efforts. It is high time that we stood up to be counted on important issues. But I suggest to you that somewhere in our consciousness there should be a gnawing, disturbing feeling of guilt, of dark and damning complicity. If we are indeed the self-annointed guardians of the language, how is it that we did not find ways to guard it well enough to preclude the possibility of such complete and near-perfect deception of the American public, a public that represents the products of our instruction? If we are indeed the self-annointed guardians of the language, how is it that we did not guard it well enough to preclude the possibility that it would be so blatantly abused by the deceivers, all of whom are products of the best that our educational system has to offer? No single social institution can be invested with total responsibility for a nation's social ills, but is it not at least remotely possible that we might have made a major contribution to the perpetuation of those ills? I suggest that we did make that contribution, that we share complicity in creating the double-speakers we berate and in producing the gullible consumers of their irresponsible rhetoric.

To place our role in appropriate historical perspective, some understandings are necessary. First, we need to try to examine the problem as it relates to our development as a nation. Secondly, we need to examine our role as teachers in contributing to the problem (or at least in not solving it). And, as a result of these understandings, we need to explore some possible solutions--solutions,

I suggest, that are more complex, sophisticated and far-reaching than the simplistic clarion call of the back-to-the-basics brigade.

We all are aware that one of the best ways to see ourselves as individuals, as groups, or as a nation is to examine ourselves from the perspective of outside viewers. One of the most penetrating, incisive commentaries on American affairs and on our characteristics as a people is provided by Alistair Cooke in an essay called "What's the Matter with America?" from his book One Man's America (Random House, Alfred Knopf, 1952). In the essay Cooke recounts an experience at a meeting to which he and a number of other foreigners had been "extended an endearing American invitation to come and say what was an American and, if we liked, to say what was wrong with America." Among the foreigners was a Hungarian who had pondered the question on a "high ethical level" to find an equivalent for the words used to describe other nationalities; for example, the Spanish are known for their honor and the English for fair play. What was the word for the Americans? I'll quote here from Cooke's account:

> It will not surprise you, perhaps, to hear that the Hungarian had found the word. Somebody hinted later that he had known it before he ever took the boat across the Atlantic. The word was "salesmanship." His theory was that industrial genius is nothing in itself. Nor, it seemed, was there anything peculiarly American about a vast population of eager though slightly skeptical customers. It is the lifeline between them that counts. And that is the salesman. The product must connect with the buyer.
>
> Elementary, maybe. But notice the snide American element in this familiar process. Where, he asked (and it must have been a rhetorical question, because he knew the answer all right), is the weakest link in the chain of supply and demand? Everybody waited politely and then let out an exploding gasp when he pronounced the word:

> 'the idiot.' The what? we hissed and muttered. 'The idiot,' he said sternly. 'The intelligent man,' he explained, 'knows things the idiot does not know. But the idiot does know some things the intelligent man does not know. Therefore the idiot is the one who must be won over. At this point, the American system has to call on a body of shock troops who represent to American civilization what the Jesuits are to the Roman Catholic Church and the S.S. men were to the Nazis: the advertising men.'

Cooke goes on to recount the arguments advanced by the group against the alleged ad man/idiot adversary relationship. But there is a haunting truth in the Hungarian's assessment. Almost every facet of our existence, almost all of our institutions reflect, often quite unconsciously, a Barnum and Bailey-like contempt for the ignorance of the masses. What other explanation can be offered for a technology capable of reaching the moon, but which produces death traps for cars and uses the slick 'honest John" ad man to convince the consumer (idiot) that he should experience the new life that his new car can guarantee. How can we justify the Virginia Slims snide suggestive use of "You've come a long way, baby" except as "idiot bait" for a new clientile? What else but massive contempt can be offered to explain a political system which has reduced the making of a president to an exact and predictable science based upon the calculated and provable idiocy of each constituency to whom the candidate must appeal? If the ad man syndrome is not integral to our society, what other explanation can be forwarded for the fact, as Dan Ninimo demonstrates in The Political Persuaders, that the "image" of the candidate is possibly more important than real issues or policies, that professional campaign managers, pollsters, and media experts direct modern campaigns so effectively as to deceive the public and render meaningful choice

among candidates impossible. How can the phenomenal success of the Blaxploitation or Sexploitation filmmaker be explained in any other context except contemptuous disregard for the gullible masses? And is it really accidental and incidental and inconsequential that the one-eyed monster in our homes, which captures an inordinate amount of attention and time of young, old and in-between, is accurately referred to as the "idiot box"?

Examples of the contemptuous search of the ad man for the idiot abound in every corner of our society. And the voices in our schools that were beginning to speak out against this attitude are all but drowned out now by the roar of the back-to-the-basics brigade who are caught up in alarming set of statistics which suggest that the children of the gullible masses are leaving our schools with levels of preparation barely equal to semi-literacy. The wonder of it all is that those of us who ought to be in the know have failed to make any connection between the two problems. The sad but true fact is that we are indeed producing semi-literate young people; but we also have produced in past generations and are now living with two kinds of illiterates: 1) the functionally illiterate masses of adults presumably well schooled in the basics, but whose ignorance of the nuances of language and media cause them to be manipulated by the contemptuous ad men, and 2) the morally illiterate, Machiavellian ad men whose ignorance of and disregard for the ethics of language allows them to manipulate the masses without a twinge of conscience.

The older generations of illiterate adults are products of a system of mass education in which the goal was to produce adults pre-adapted for an industrial world regulated by the factory whistle

and the time clock. Their curriculum was clearly prescribed, with primary attention given to the three r's. There was a right answer to every question with what to think given priority over how to think. In order to use language one learned the prescribed rules of grammar, and literature was interpreted according to the teacher's prescription. Arbitrarily established rules of correct form and absence of error in oral and written expression measured one's level of "literacy." In other words, the basics were well in hand in the schools--and the teaching of English became established as a prime vehicle for the control and regimentation necessary to produce the industrial and technological servant and the fat, dumb, and happy conspicuous consumer.

The adult products of the "basics" referred to earlier quite likely can write sentences that are structurally correct; but all evidence suggests that few are capable of sorting out and evaluating the ideas in the written and oral sentences of the ad men or (of equal importance) of processing the complicated and convoluted visual messages with which they are bombarded daily by lurking forms of media of which they scarcely are aware. They were programmed primarily by their language instruction, to be told what to eat, what to wear, for whom they should vote, what and whom they should like or dislike, what to buy and when, and even where to live. And they are most appalled by what <u>appears</u> to be a trend away from those "basics" with which they were so comfortable. If that kind of teaching was good enough for them, it should be good enough for their kids.

And what about the kids? Whether we want to believe the sta-

tistics or not, there is much truth in the claims of lack of literacy. Many students in our schools cannot read and write with any reasonable degree of proficiency. No amount of scapegoating or bending of the statistics can change the fact that the problem does exist; but there is much room for argument about both the causes and the proposed solutions. If we do not quickly come upon appropriate solutions, the next and succeeding generations will leave our schools so vulnerable and so susceptible to manipulation as to make Orwell's 1984 seem like a "lived happily ever after" fairy tale.

The back-to-the-basics call represents really a quite simplistic assessment of the problem. Because the students are not learning the basics does not necessarily suggest that the basics are not being emphasized. All evidence suggests that the basics are indeed well in hand in the schools - that no really significant changes in the content and methodology of English teaching have occurred in the past thirty to forty years--this in spite of the number of significant studies suggesting that change is necessary and desirable. It is not uncommon to enter a modern classroom and find oneself transported back in time by the sight of students reading assigned literature lessons and answering twenty "stock" questions in complete sentences, plagiarizing the same dusty references for their "original" papers on the life of the author, and taking apart textbook sentences as a means of discovering how their language works. Weekly spelling and vocabulary tests on irrelevant lists of words still are the bane of kids' existence. The trappings may appear modern: If the teacher's particular bandwagon is linguistics, then the students might be

taking apart sentences from one of the newer linguistics textbooks. Or, under the guise of individualized instruction, each student may be marching at his own cadence through the pages of a deductively organized workbook, programmed text, learning package, or learning station. It's always the rule first, with just enough new terminology to confuse and intimidate the student, and then endless drill exercise for reinforcement.

If the basics are indeed still being taught, then what accounts for the pernicious illiteracy problem? If the adult population did at least master some of the basics during the "school as factory" era, why can't (or don't) today's kids? The answer may be very simple: today's kids are different. They are products of a media oriented society which perhaps has produced different ways of perceiving that our teaching does not take into account. They are not aware of any pressing need to read; and the reading models among adults are few and far between. And no one writes any more; the telephone always is close at hand, so why bother. Further, these students are products of a more permissive upbringing, so that previously effective disciplinary attempts to police them into literacy fall flat. And, lacking the intrinsic motivations to pick up the basics, the students reject much of the material and many of the experiences of today's classroom because no connection has been made between the learning experience and reality <u>as the students perceive it</u>, What I am referring to here is that elusive term, "relevance." It means recognition of the line of human experience that pervades all literature from any time or place; it means seeing language in its spoken and written forms as a marvel of communication; it means finding and starting with content and experiences

to which students can relate; and it means helping students to relate to content and experiences different from their own. Above all, it means bringing to the students real ideas and real experiences that will implicitly answer each student's implicit question: "What's in it for me?"

Paradoxical as it may seem, I am suggesting that each of the succeeding generations over the past forty years or so, including the present generation, has not suffered from lack of the basics; if anything, each has suffered in its own way from a lopsided overemphasis upon the basics, basics defined so narrowly as to be stifling and counter-productive. The teaching of English, as defined in the back-to-the-basics call, and reinforced by the tyranny of quantitative testing, is synonymous with grammar exercises, vocabulary and usage drill, weekly spelling lessons, and regurgitation of plot, setting, and character identifications from literature classics. Writing, when done at all, stresses form and mechanics to the detriment of quality of ideas and logical development. And reading lessons focus on such inane basics as syllabication, vocabulary drill, and every other conceivable rote exercise; rarely is the whole process of reading stressed. Each time I board an airplane, I cannot help but think how distressed I would be to know that my pilot could earn his license by simply being able to identify all of the buttons on the flight panel and to tell how each is used. Such knowledge hardly would qualify him to take my life into his hands. Similarly, a push-button, bits and pieces approach to the "basics" of English hardly qualifies a student to be considered a responsible user or consumer of language. If we are unhappy with the present day ad man-in-search-of-the-idiot

syndrome in our society, God help us in the future!

The time is at hand (and running out) for us to recognize and put an end to our complicity with the other forces that have contributed to the problems of illiteracy among all generations. The prospects are not very bright for much of the adult population, many of whom cannot recognize the kind of illiteracy to which they have fallen victim. But the prospects are encouraging for reversing the trend among our school populations. Fortunately, there exists a body of research and experimentation which, if properly utilized, can undergird efforts to arrive at a more realistic, broad, theoretical redefinition of the basics that will be more compatible with present-day and future language needs. In other words, we don't need to go back to the narrowly defined basics; we've never left them, and that precisely is the problem. I would suggest that we as English teachers must drag ourselves (albeit kicking and screaming) into the second half of the twentieth century--at least before the twenty-first century arrives.

Close examination of published research reveals what the real basics ought to be. In 1952, The English Language Arts, published by NCTE, identified the basic interrelated skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Other succeeding NCTE publications through the years identified the total language processes involved with and revolving around the skills required for English proficiency. The movement has been decidedly away from the teaching of skills in isolation. There has been a steady decline in the former emphasis upon grammar exercises, sentence parsing, and other isolated drillwork. Instead, NCTE publications advocate the importance of lang-

uage arts skills being used to reinforce each other. In this process of reinforcement, students should explore a wide range of reading interests, get involved in a variety of related learning activities and thereby develop a firmer grasp of all of the necessary language competencies.

Available research in the teaching of language, composition, and literature suggests that isolated teaching of skills cannot be justified. The findings suggest that, like synergy, the whole (language acquisition and development) is greater than the sum of its parts (unrelated, isolated drill teaching of grammar, spelling, mechanics). The multiplicity of studies all underscore the interrelated nature of language. Studies by McCarthy, Diederich and Frogner suggest that maturity and stage of intellectual development [not grammar and sentence parsing] are closely related to composition skill. Composition and reading are assumed to be closely related, this assumption based upon the obvious interrelationship between the writer's message, the chosen medium, and the reader's skill in interpreting the message. Good measures of reading ability have turned out to be the most trustworthy indices of writing ability.

Searles and Carlson suggest the uselessness of teaching grammar and usage in isolation from composition. Cook criticized the isolated teaching of grammar, syntax, and punctuation and stressed the fact that if language is to be viewed as an instrument of communication, grammar should be taught not as a set of rules but as a factor in comprehending meaning. Similar viewpoints have been expressed by McKee and Ebbit. NCTE criticized highly the methods involved in devoting separate time periods to separate skills with-

out relating those skills. And a 1958 study by Meckel, Squire, and Leonard stressed the importance of reading as a source of ideas and writing as a means of clarifying, organizing, and applying ideas from reading and discussion.

The result of these highly influential studies in English has been an involving definition of "basics" that treats the discipline as an interrelated whole, and not only avoids, but also disavows the kind of "basic" content now being defined by tests and called for loudly in the Back-to-Basics issue.

What we have learned from an examination of the viewpoints of authorities in the profession and also from research is that language development is a process which deserves a broad approach. Emphasis in teaching needs to be placed upon the ability to use the smaller content skills (grammar, usage, vocabulary, spelling, etc.) in relevant language processes and to keep those elements in perspective as supportive to the larger processes; for it is these larger processes which I believe represent the real basics we must be concerned about. A way to focus in on language as a process is to use what we have learned about language acquisition and development to derive a set that can be applied to all human language activities. Three basic levels of processes can be identified in ascending order: 1) imitative processes related to basic literacy at the recognition and recall levels, 2) organizing processes related to fluency in the use of basic language tools, and 3) critical, creative, and evaluative processes involving originality and conscious choice of language alternatives. A grid like the following might result:

	CONTENT SKILLS		
Processes	Reading	Oral Language	Writing
Imitative (No thinking)	Recognition and recall of ideas	Basic auditory perception, discriminatory reproduction (in any dialect)	Basic literacy in manipulating symbols
Organizing (Convergent thinking)	Organizing and interpreting ideas	Ease and fluency of oral communication	Organizing and producing messages in sentences, paragraphs, etc.
Critical/Creative Evaluative (Divergent thinking)	Reading critically and selectively	Conscious choice of language alternatives	Conscious choice of patterns to suit purpose (originality, style)

At the lowest level (imitative) no thinking is required. Yet it is at this level that roughly eighty per cent of our teaching exists. The content at this level represents the basics to which we are asked to return. At the second level, organizing, convergent thinking is stressed. The emphasis is upon putting together ideas and facts, and deriving supportable generalizations, conclusions, or concepts. This important skill currently is given only minimal attention. And at the third and highest level - where critical, evaluative, and creative processes evolve into divergent thinking - attention is virtually nil.

The new "basics" I propose would revolve around a number of basic freedoms for both students and teachers. These freedoms include the removal of high and low prestige labels from English curricular content, more authority and responsibility for teachers, a redefinition of "basic" learnings, and removal of artificial and inhibitory tracking practices. In literature the focus would

be upon feeedom to read, upon study of relevant literary works which adequately and realistically reflect the multi-racial, multi-cultural society in which we live; so that as students are exposed to the commonalities of all ethnic groups they can be enabled to appreciate also the small differences that give to each of our sub-cultures their distinct richness and individuality. The ogre of censorship would be removed, with the realization by all parties concerned that one individual's right not to read should never be allowed to overshadow another individual's right to read. The teacher would retain the basic right to make appropriate judgements about teaching materials and would also be charged with the responsibility for avoiding any artificial reasons for making choices and above all, avoiding forced choices. Our tenacity of purpose would lead us to choose materials that do two things very well: enlighten the life experience through their content and broaden the horizons of the reader.

As far as basic reading skills are concerned, the curriculum at early levels would place its emphasis upon developing the skills that undergird the process of learning to read. But at later elementary levels, through middle school, high school, and into college and beyond, the focus in teaching reading must shift from learning to read to reading to learn. Not enough can be said to reinforce the cruciality of developing the processes of learning and thinking--of drawing the subject matter of reading from the stuff of life, and of applying critical thought processes to a variety of real and vicarious situations. What is important is not the development of a "correct answer" mentality (the kind which makes us all so

susceptible to the tactics of the ad man), but rather the development of inductive and deductive processes by which answers can be derived. This quote from a well-known psychologist is worth noting:

> "With factual knowledge now multiplying at a geometric rate, the illiterate of the future will be the person who has not learned how to learn."

No area of basic instruction is more crucial than that of language development. By their over-emphasis on correctness as opposed to appropriateness, English teachers who heed the current back-to-the-basics approach are in danger of becoming either willing or unwitting accomplices in the process of retrenchment, conservatism, and repression. Clear distinctions must be made between grammar (syntactical arrangement of lexical choices) and usage (conscious choice of language alternatives). And the element of choice must be foremost. Standard English (whatever that is) must take its place among the many dialects of English. It must be recognized that all dialects are not just equally good in and of themselves: they also are all equally good language systems <u>for</u> learning to read, to write, and to think. The use of linguistic repression as a means of reinforcing concepts of social inferiority has been a major factor affecting the learning of large numbers of speakers of other dialects. Pertinent research indicates that teacher attitudes toward dialect and dialect speakers, and not dialect interference, may be at the core of learning problems for Black, Hispanic, and other "dialect speaking" children. Research also indicates that there is no one whose speech does not represent some form of dialect. Research also has indicated that all dialects are equally efficient for learning to read and write standard orthography (probably the only element of English that is standard-

ized to any degree). It is my conclusion that we cannot aspire to the unrelenting tyranny of clubbing dialect speakers into conformity with some notion of a standard English, the nature of which--outside of its orthography and some conventions peculiar to our writing system--cannot be described.

My concept of the basics to which we should aspire rejects the concept of forced bidialectalism as untenable. Man is a social being. Because this is so, the English classroom should become the testing ground for exploring alternatives for effective communication. By providing opportunities for discourse and dialogue (in discussion, dramatic play and other group interactions) the English class can help the students test out, in a non-threatening atmosphere, the roles they will be required to play and help them to become alert to appropriate language choices for oral and written communication. Learners must be allowed to use, not just analyze, language. If the emphasis in the "basics" does shift from detached analysis to involved use, it is quite likely that students not only will learn more of the basics we prize so highly but also they just might discover why those basics are significant.

As far as the teaching of writing is concerned, the basics I would propose would shift the emphasis away from form, structure, and grammaticality as ends in and of themselves. Instead, these basics would be placed in perspective as tools to be used in the larger process of identifying an audience, choosing the appropriate message and communicating that message clearly and effectively and honestly. To stop short of that larger goal is to continue the unfair and tyrannical practice of using the "basics" as a weapon --

of forcing students into a do-or-die struggle to apply incomprehensible rules for which they have been taught no application--to strive for the form and structure they have been taught about but not taught how to achieve.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize the fact that Public Doublespeak is not at all a recent phenomenon. The concern for irresponsible and manipulatory use of language really is as old as language itself. Ancient philosophers and rhetoricians such as Aristotle, Cicero and Quintillian worried that orators should be virtuous men lest they abuse the powers of rhetoric. Throughout history, men of selfish, evil intent or demonic leanings have captivated the masses and led them into disastrous consequences through missuse and abuse of the powers of rhetoric, which has as its purpose the persuasion of people to action. If history has any lesson at all for us, it is this unchanging fact: such men always will be with us. To think that we can eliminate them by making preachments about ethics is utter folly. There is little hope ever of eliminating the contemptuous and contemptible public liar--the ad man who feeds like a vulture upon the carrion of public ignorance. What we must do, then, is concentrate our efforts on the consumers--so that they can develop basic skills like the following -

- recognizing the clear, straightforward, graceful and honest statement of an idea
- rejection of the vapidity that results from contrived, artificial message making
- detection and interpretation of a writer's or speaker's tone, stance, and intent by looking beyond the facts and beyond the immediate context to get the total meaning of what is read or heard
- critical questioning of the kinds of "authority" used as "idiot bait" [For example, O. J. Simpson may look ever

so pretty, and he may run like a gazelle, but those facts have little to do with the efficiency of the rent-a-car business]

- attending to the sensitivity and power of visual media--looking beyond the contrived image to sort out the lurking falsehoods of the message carried by that contrived image

We are in Boston, and this is our bicentennial year. Looking back over the years to the pre-Revolutionary period, we note that the goal during that time was to provide our emerging nation with an internal defense system by which Americans could be rendered free from economic and social bondage. In this bicentennial it is now not only appropriate but also crucial to our continued physical freedom to provide each individual with an internal defense system by which he can be rendered free from intellectual bondage. For years our schools have been almost totally occupied with the lowest level of instruction --the imitative, parrot-like mechanisms involved in mastering the "basics." And the back-to-basics call asks us to do more of it. This, I contend, is a kind of glorified potty training; and I contend further that because we are so much the hovering, worrisome mother, our kids become more and more recalcitrant and resistant. What must occur is an elevation of our attention from the development of anal-compulsive non-thinking behavior to the development not only of the ability to exercise convergent thinking that leads to supportable conclusions and generalizations, but also of the ability to employ more and more successful <u>divergent</u> thinking-- the kind that stretches the imagination to break through the bondage of what <u>is</u> and projects the individual into a confrontation with what could be and, most important, what ought to be. What I am asking for really is

simple: since we can never entirely rid the world of the contemptuous ad man who uses the deceit of public doublespeak to purchase power and economic wealth, we can considerably diminish his margin of profit by thwarting him in his search for idiots.